

A Commentary on the Songs in Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor*

Translated into English by Anjum Katyal

Chandi Mandal

Assistant Teacher, English (Hons/PG)

Chandra K S H High School (HS)

Vill & PO- Chandra, Dist- Bankura

State- West Bengal,

India

Abstract:

A set of words set to music, song is often incorporated in a play to create musical effects. Sometimes songs are combined with dance and stage spectacle to provide entertaining experiences to the audience. The choric function of the songs offering a variety of background information and summary is also an old practice. But sometimes these elements of music go beyond their traditional boundaries and serve a great many varieties of dramatic purposes. This paper briefly discusses the songs used in Habib Tanvir's *Charandas Chor* translated into English by Anjum Katyal, evaluates their significance in relation to the drama and shows how much the playwright is successful in making the musical pieces an integral part of the text.

Keywords: Song, truth, thief, paradox, satire etc.

Originally an adaptation of a Rajasthani folk tale written by Vijaydan Detha, Habib Tanvir's masterpiece *Charandas Chor* begins with a folk song, sung by a group of Panthi singers and dancers. A folk tale or song is associated with the "traditional style of a country or community". And Panthi is the most popular ritual or dance form of the Satnami Community of Chhattisgarh. They celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Guru Ghasidas who established the community based on 'satnam' meaning 'truth'. This finds appropriate expression in the very opening song of the play, which is in praise of truth:

Satyanam! Satyanam! Satyanam!
Praise the truth, nothing better,

The play is about a petty thief Charandas whose adherence to truth transforms him into a real hero, a man who dies for the cause of truth. In this context, Habib Tanvir opines, "I also had this other idea in my mind, that there's this man called Socrates who died for truth, and accepted it, but wouldn't budge from his path of truth. There was Jesus Christ—same thing. There was Gandhi, who also stuck to his principles, and died. Here is a common man...an unheroic simple man who gets caught up in his vows...and dies". And the first two lines of the song, as stated above, are suggestive enough in introducing the central theme of the play.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna speaks to Arjuna on the importance of finding a guru: "Acquire the transcendental knowledge from a Self-realized master by humble reverence, by sincere inquiry, and by service. The wise ones who have realized Truth will impart the knowledge to you." And in Tanvir's play, the first song goes on:

Praise the guru, no one greater,
Who alone brings down to us
The divine nectar of Truth.

The holy guru has the power to access the divine source of pure truth; and he can bring the 'nectar' 'down from on high' for the redemption of the mankind. He teaches the worth of truth, "Truth is so precious". He does 'uphold the truth', 'lead by example' and 'raise the world high' on 'the scales of truth'. Unlike a commoner, "The sadhu roams the forest alone." Thus we are made to have a traditional image of the Guru embodying selflessness and sacrifice, truth and spirituality, religious knowledge and divine power. Needless to say, such a spiritual teacher is much in demand throughout the play. In fact it is the Guru who is instrumental in bringing Charandas' reformation.

"Within two months of the death of the noted playwright and social activist Habib Tanvir, the Chhattisgarh govt. has banned his classic, *Charandas Chor* ...following protest by the Satnami Community, which alleges that it insults their leader, Guru Ghasidas." Naturally, therefore, the portrayal of the character of the Guru is not so flat and conventional as it appears in the initial songs of the play. Soon the other side of the same coin gets revealed. The Guru is found to be money-minded and self-centric, showing much concern with his 'gurudakshina':

Is it salvation you want? Just
Give the guru his due
All learning is a shame till you
Give the guru his due

If one is to watch good things happen to him or her, it is mandatory to follow the Guru's 'rule' of 'Cash down'. Thus, together with blessing and preaching, the 'baba' is making money either. Similarly, the traditional devotional song based on the *Ramayana*, sung at the 'priest's temple' creates an atmosphere of religiosity and devotion only to expose the priest's lust for gold. One understands that here Tanvir is sarcastic in his treatment of the religious gurus and priests of the time. Again, his handling of the brilliant juxtaposition of the opposite makes his characters more realistic, critical and interesting. And this paradox or self-contradiction, as recorded in the songs, dominates the entire play. To quote Shubhanku Kochar, *Charandas Chor* is "A Study in Paradox"

Tanvir's songs are steeped in fun and laughter but there is an undercurrent of wit. The cat-and-mouse play songs provide a great deal of amusement. As Tom and Jerry in the popular American animated series of short films, created by William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, Mr. Babu Das, the havaldar and Charandas, the thief are a source of slapstick comedy. The havaldar is always ready to take up the trail of the elusive thief:

The cat is out, the cat's about
The cat is on the prowl
All in a trice she brings down mice
and then she has a fall.

The cat-and-mouse chase goes on throughout the play, but the cat can never catch hold of the mouse: the havaldar is always befooled by Charandas. In these songs, the playwright has made use of a refrain which is of utmost importance: "Rumble, tumble, take a ride,/ Off with the lid, and what is inside?" The lid of a container hides the stuff within. And in order to discover what is inside, the lid must be removed or taken off. The havaldar has no professional efficiency: he fails to catch the thief. He can't find out the truth covered with the lid of a thief's intelligence. The true nature of the custodian of law is further revealed, when Charandas sings: "The cat's become the cover." The protector of law does not mind befriending a thief if the booty is shared with him. Thus the playwright hints at the fact that the first and foremost duty of the law is to look deep into itself if it is to free the society from the taint of corruption.

Indeed, many of the songs are serious and thoughtful commentary on the existing social and political set up. Charandas is a thief but he is honest and truthful. He is held in high esteem in the eyes of the common people. He thievs, but thievs like the popular folk figure Robin Hood: he robs the rich and gives to the poor. This accounts for why the chorus sings: "Charandas is not a thief, not a thief, no way!" In stark contrast to Charandas, the land lord looks like 'the innocent flower' but actually is a 'serpent' under it:

There are so many rogues about, who do not look like thieves,
Impressive turbans on their heads, softly shod their feet,
But open up their safes and you will surely see,
Stolen goods, ill-gotten wealth, riches got free.

The songs thus takes us into a topsy-turvy world where “It is fun to deceive, to cheat and to lie” and “The cheats and the liars are doing just fine”. Here, to quote again from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, “Fair is foul and foul is fair”:

The thief is a king, the king is a thief
The gods and the thieves, they dance cheek to cheek,
The doctors themselves are too sick to take care,
Oh, here comes the thief, out of thin air!

In this socio-political scenario, it is very likely that the queen lacks her professional efficiency: the state authority fails to catch up with the petty thief: they have to rely on Charandas’ adherence to truth:

Charandas, you truthful thief,
Don’t you try and hide,
Since you are a truthful man
Remember your pride.
Confess your crime in durbar,
At the rani’s side.

It is thus nothing but absolute absurdities and incongruities that reign the society. In a nutshell, Tanvir’s songs point out “the existing social order as disorder”

The songs foretell an event, sum it up and comment on it. Towards the end of the play, a group of Panthi singers prepare the readers for Charandas’ impending doom:

Oh, Charandas, don’t try to rob death of his due
Your name and fame will be taken from you.

Will Charandas give up truth that brings name and fame to a petty thief to avoid inevitable death? No. He will stick to truth. His honesty may be put to a terrible ordeal, but he will not give it up. As the liar can never give up lying, a gambler gambling or a drunkard drinking; Charandas can never forsake truth. “Truth is an addiction just like all the rest.” Yes, the words of the song prove true: Charandas dies. And then comes the closing song in the form of an epilogue:

An ordinary thief is now a famous man,
And how did he do it?
By telling the truth.

Charandas was a petty thief who jokingly made a vow never to tell a lie. Both rich and poor, he lived a 'strange and unusual' life. And he died for the sake of truth. Now he has achieved immortality in his death.

Dexterously incorporated, the songs are thus capable of carrying manifold meanings and suggestions. They are funny, witty and satirical. They help introducing, scanning and commenting on a character. They predict, explain and sum up an event. As a whole, the songs blend the scenes and establish the theme of the play either. The paradoxical, tragicomic nature of the play can hardly be accepted without such a brilliant use of the songs. To conclude, Tanvir is as successful as a lyricist as the drama itself.

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